

UNB Brunswickan

Perspectives: In Memory Of a Great Man

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"A university is a place where rich kids go to get richer." - [Abby Hoffman](#),
UNB, 1987.

In Abby's defense, it was late at night, after an exhausting day of interviews, he had the flu, and he was an American. The 1960's radical was almost at the end of his rope, cynical, disillusioned, and within a year of committing suicide. But I have never forgotten the meaning behind his words, and his disappointment with the concern for larger political issues among today's university students.

For all that-gray-haired, hoarse-voiced, tired, and sad-he was a magnetic presence in MacLaggan Room 105, and he finished on an upbeat note, predicting a rise in student activism in the 1990's surpassing even that of the 1960's. He felt that the catalyst for this re-emergence would be environmental concern-a feeling among young people that their elders had messed things up pretty terribly, and that it was up to the young to set things straight, just as they had in the 1960's about the war in Vietnam. This would be a development devoutly to be wished, but on the whole, I see few signs that he was right.

Today's students are an apathetic lot, just as they have been for the last fifteen or twenty years, with little concern beyond the immediate, little sign that they are going to change, and apparently comfortable with their lethargy.

Why is that? I believe the cause lies in a fundamental misunderstanding of the definition and meaning of the word "politics". If you or I had a dime for every loonie who said "I hate politics and pay as little attention to it as possible", one of us would be wealthy.

The terrible part is that this attitude feeds a vicious circle. A friend of mine sums it up like this: "When good people exclude themselves from the political process, they allow scoundrels to control it, thereby degrading it, so that even fewer people are willing to become involved in a process that appears to be so scoundrelous!"

Let us forget the street definition of "politics", which has become so distorted it seems to mean "back-stabbing while in the pursuit of material gain." Politics is an activity that, in its original and proper definition, is pretty much synonymous with consensus and compromise. It means the gathering of views from all citizens, and the careful crafting of acceptable compromise. The essential observation is this: politics is not only honourable and important, but fundamentally necessary, for without politics the only alternatives are anarchy or dictatorship.

In the absence of political institutions in which the people may practice the art of political compromise, the consequences are usually disastrous. A voiceless people (no matter how powerless) will almost invariably turn to violence eventually to make their concerns heard. The native crisis in Oka, Quebec is a classic example of the consequences resulting from the absence of the practice of politics.

It therefore grieves me to see the free citizens of the democracy of Canada excluding themselves from politics, and thereby allowing the scoundrels to rush in. If the price of freedom is eternal vigilance, then the price of democratic representation must be involvement in politics. The alternative is frustration.

This involvement need not take the form of membership in a political party, but it must include knowledge of the issues of the day (which is most efficiently obtained by daily reading of a newspaper, preferably provincial or national). Second, one must be prepared to voice one's opinion on issues, listen to the opinions of others, and be prepared to change your views. Finally, one must vote in elections, if not for a candidate, then against one.

If you don't involve yourself in politics, then you have absolutely no right to complain about the decisions taken by the scoundrels who do.

I think Abby would agree with that.
